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The Prime case



Another spy, with some new as well as old lessons

Britain—and with it the Atlantic alliance—have been afflicted with yet another spy scandal. Stories about the secrets leaked to the Soviet Union by an official at the British government communications headquarters at Cheltenham had been circulating for some weeks, especially in the United States. In Britain the case was sub judice until November 10th, when the judge trying it said that penetration of Britain's Russian signals monitoring section had done "incalculable harm". Mr Geoffrey Prime, a 44-year-old former linguist in the section, had been passing secrets to the Russians since 1968 (see page 63). Speaking to the British parliament after the belated disgrace of Sir Anthony Blunt in 1979, Mrs Thatcher said that, since Blunt's treachery, "procedures for recruitment, vetting and monitoring members of the public services who have access to classified information have been much extended and improved". More will need to be said on this subject, but already three stark lessons are apparent.

Vetting, elint, allies

Mrs Thatcher was praised at the time for her notably open attitude to the Blunt revelations. The first lesson of the Prime case, however, is that her remarks about "improved vetting and monitoring" now look complacent. Mr Prime had apparently not just been "positively vetted" but had actually been subject to "indoctrination", the most intensive form of clearance. Yet for 14 years he was able to pass secrets to the Russians. His work was uncovered almost by chance. This is another chapter in the long history of shortcomings in the

vetting service. The Prime affair suggests the need for ruthless revision of procedures. Some small ideas: periodic covert surveillance; the names of all secret service and sensitive employees to be put into the police national computer so that any entry even for petty crime is signalled; their passports to be marked so that immigration officials inspect their tickets and report their travel. Big ideas are needed too.

The second lesson is that the modern shift in intelligence gathering towards electronics and signals (in the jargon, "elint" and "sigint") is introducing new problems of security which the British have yet to master. It is an increasing complaint of old-style espionage that too much emphasis is now placed on technology and not enough on the experience and judgment of human agents—"humint". The reduction in the number of agents on the ground and the expansion of Cheltenham have inevitably increased the numbers of more junior officials handling sensitive material. This has increased the risk of penetration. The message in the heel of the boot may have been a primitive intelligence method, but it was accessible to fewer people than are the airwaves which now carry an immense volume of material. The problems of digesting and assessing this material were graphically demonstrated in the prelude to the Falklands war. The problems of keeping it secure were not.

The third worrying aspect of this affair is the impact it will have on American confidence and co-operation with Britain in security matters. This has never been as close as is often assumed. But during the Falklands war, for instance, collaboration over signals intercepts was very close indeed. It is precisely this area which the Prime affair has called in question. The passage of intercepts between Britain and Washington's National Security Agency at Fort Meade (the American equivalent of Cheltenham) has been a growing feature of Anglo-American intelligence co-operation. It has been an exchange very much in Britain's favour—given the much greater resources the Americans can devote to gathering. Mrs Thatcher's relations with the United States have been passing through a rough patch lately, despite the much-vaunted ideological compatibility between her and President Reagan. She now has a task to convince him and his administration that she is able to clean out stables which have given her and her predecessors some of their muckiest moments in office.